TECHNOLOGY AND THE HUNTER

Hunters are tinkerers, always looking for ways to improve their experiences, whether it's comfort, safety, getting in range of game, or increasing success once the game is in range.

It's part of human nature. Who hasn't spent at least a little time thinking about how to make something better, or dreaming up something that doesn't exist that would make hunting, or life, a little easier?

Many of us have also taken the next step and invested more than a little time and/or money developing ideas or building models or buying something someone else is producing.

Because of this ever-present desire to improve, deer hunters are safer because they have blaze orange clothing instead of red; waterfowl hunters are drier and warmer because they have breathable, flexible waterproof coats and moisture wicking undergarments; and pheasant hunters can walk mile after painless mile in comfort-cushioned boots carrying ever-lighter shotguns.

Sometimes, however, the inner drive to innovate produces tools, gadgets and processes that may cross the line of good taste or acceptable use, even though the original intent was sincere. Motorized, spinning-winged duck decoys are a good example. The inventors were likely just trying to attract more ducks to their decoys, not unlike others who made lighter decoys so a hunter could carry more, or made better paint jobs so decoys seemed more realistic – also in the name of attracting more ducks.

Motorized decoys became popular because of their apparent effectiveness. For that same reason, several states (North Dakota is not one of them) are implementing restrictions or outright bans on their use.

Keep in mind, the root of the restrictions is not the spinning wings. It's the small electric motor that spins the wings, which on some models can be turned on and off with a remote control. Spinning-winged decoys that get their motion from the wind have not been restricted in those states that have at least some restrictions on motorized decoys.

In similar fashion, with the exception of the spring snow goose season, electronic calls are not allowed for waterfowl hunting, though hand-held calls powered by human air have long been a tradition in duck blinds and goose pits.

Maintaining the consideration of "fair chase" in hunting is a legitimate concern of administrators in conservation agencies across the country. Inventions and new technologies are closely scrutinized when they have the potential to stretch the limits of acceptability.

For instance, technology has advanced far enough to bring the cost of night vision optics down into consumer range. Currently, North Dakota doesn't have any law that would prevent someone from using a night vision device to keep track of a deer through the night, when they are out and active, then move into position for a shot when legal shooting time arrives.

Will this become enough of an issue for the state to consider new laws that might limit the hours a hunter could be afield during deer season, or ban the use of night vision optics for spotting game altogether?

The hunting world has a fair share of these types of situations. Some have been debated and put to rest; some are firmly established in law but are still frequently debated; the resolution of others is still not clear; and who knows how many are yet to develop. "Just look at the advancements made in the last 25 years alone," says North Dakota Game and Fish Department Director Dean Hildebrand. "The same thing will happen in the next 25. This causes me to be concerned about fair chase, we don't want science to get ahead of the resource."

The wildlife agencies responsible for drawing lines or changing regulations to protect game resources – or reputations of hunters – seldom please everyone who has an opinion on an issue. Fortunately, most issues have more than one point of view to ponder and that can lead to healthy dialogue.

Following are a few technology related or other relatively recent advances that have been (or likely will be) debated within the hunting community, From Both Sides.

IN-LINE MUZZLE-LOADERS

One side: In-line muzzle-loaders, because of their consistent firing and improved accuracy, help hunters be more successful when they are fortunate enough to draw limited, primitive firearm big game licenses.

The other side: In-lines are not primitive firearms at all, but rather are modern rifles that happen to be loaded from the muzzle so they still conform to state muzzleloader season laws.

ELECTRONIC RANGE FINDERS FOR ARCHERY USE

One side: Range finders provide bowhunters with more exact distance estimation, which should mean more accurate shooting and a decrease in wounding loss.

The other side: Range finders make hunters more dependent on an electrical device, rather than their own learned skills which come from practice and hands-on shooting.

TRAIL CAMERAS

One side: Trail cameras that can be left afield and triggered by remote sensors, or fired at predetermined intervals, give the hunter an idea of what animals are frequenting an area, either during the night, or other times when the hunter isn't there.

The other side: Trail cameras reduce the time people spend in the outdoors, scouting and learning about the

ins and outs of Mother Nature. Reliance on electronic devices erodes personal skills and the unpredictability that make hunting so much more satisfying when you are successful.

CRAIG BIHRLE

Cell phones, two-way radios, GPS units, night vision optics and other devices used by some during the hunt have been debated within the hunting community for their place in the field.

CABLE TELEVISION

One side: Opportunities for cable and satellite companies to offer an almost unlimited number of channels has greatly increased the amount of outdoor-related programming on television. Hunters now have much greater access to a wealth of useful information on equipment, strategies and places to go.

The other side: To fill available time slots, channels that carry mostly outdoor programming sometimes compromise quality by airing shows that promote hunting farmed deer or elk behind high fences, trying to pass it off as real hunting, or with hosts or guides who are only interested in how many birds are taken. Some programs are poor representation of the hunting community and are harmful to hunting and hunters.

ELECTRONIC CALLS

One side: Electronic calls, which are legal for hunting fox and coyotes, crows, and snow geese during the spring conservation season, can increase calling effectiveness, which can lead to better shooting opportunities.

The other side: Hunters who depend on electronic devices will spend less time developing their own calling skills and knowledge about the animal they are hunting.

GLOBAL POSITIONING SATELLITE UNITS

One side: Hunters can use GPS units to keep from getting lost. They can also mark locations of animals and areas to which a hunter would like to return. Maps on newer units are highly detailed and provide hunters with information on terrain and elevation that can greatly assist a hunt.

The other side: GPS units now are so advanced that hunters can download/upload points or maps from other sources such as mapmakers, guides, or even hunting partners who can direct them to an exact location of an animal or hunting spot. This takes the "hunt" out of hunting.

CELL PHONES/WALKIE-TALKIES

One side: Electronic communications devices are lifesavers, especially in cases of emergencies or keeping track of the location of other members of your hunting party.

The other side: The element of fair chase is compromised when these devices are used as a means to let others know that game is coming their way.

LASER BOW SIGHTS

One side: These devices make aiming a bow easier, and therefore potentially improve accuracy, during periods of low light, or for older hunters whose vision is not what it once was.

The other side: Electronic sighting encourages use before or after legal shooting hours; remove some hunting variables that are so much a part of hunting; and are illegal for use in most states, including North Dakota.

LONGER SHOTSHELLS FOR 12 GAUGE

One side: Additional shot charge in a 3.5-inch 12 gauge shell, compared to the traditional 3-inch shotshell, can provide more dense patterns of larger shot sizes, which can make for better killing efficiency within effective ranges.

The other side: Heavier shot charge is marketed to create the impression that hunters can significantly increase effective shooting range just by adding more pellets to the load, when in fact crippling rates go up when average hunters start shooting at waterfowl at longer ranges.

Are there other devices which warrant debate? What do you think? To pass along your comments, send us an e-mail at ndgf@state.nd.us; call us at 328-6300; or write North Dakota Game and Fish Department, 100 N. Bismarck Expressway, Bismarck, ND 58501.